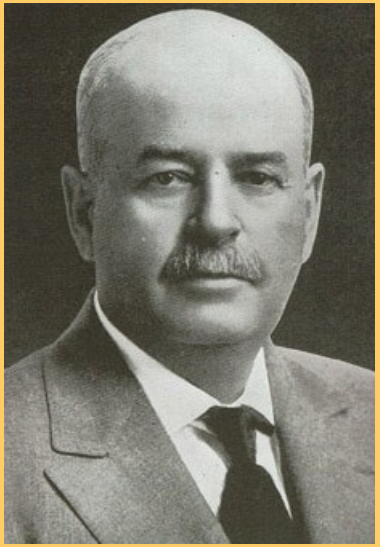
Governor Len Small

The Most Corrupt Governor of Illinois

When the Ku Klux Klan and Gangsters Ran the State

Presented by Dale C. Maley

Livingston County Historical Society



Governor
Len Small

What We'll Cover Today

- Life and career of Len Small
- Early political career and rise to power
- Embezzlement scandal and trial
- Connection to Al Capone and organized crime
- The Ku Klux Klan connection
- KKK rallies in Livingston County and Fairbury
- Pardon-selling scandal
- Comparison to other corrupt Illinois governors

Lennington "Len" Small – Early Years

Born: June 16, 1862 in Kankakee, Illinois

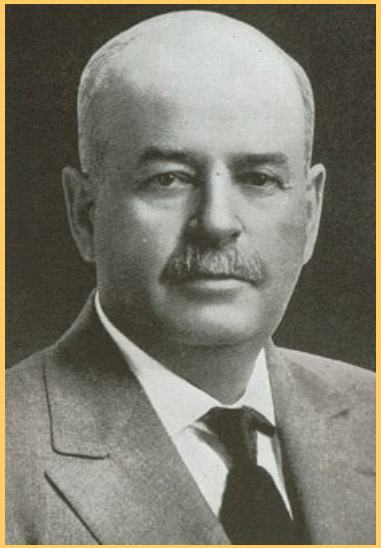
Father: Dr. Abram Lennington Small

Education: Kankakee public schools, Northern Indiana Normal School

Early careers: Teacher, realtor, farmer, banker, newspaper owner

Died: May 17, 1936

Buried: Mound Grove Cemetery, Kankakee



Small's Family

Wife: Rose Leota Tingley Small

Son: Leslie C. Small (1884-1953)

- Became manager of Daily Journal in 1913
- Operated newspaper for 40 years

Grandson: Len H. Small (died 1980)

- President of American Newspaper Publishers Association

Great-grandson: Burrell L. Small

- President of American Newspaper Publishers Association

Entry into Politics

1889-1904: Clerk of Kankakee County Court

1901-1905: Illinois State Senator

1905-1907: Illinois State Treasurer (first term)

1917-1919: Illinois State Treasurer (second term)

- *This is when the embezzlement occurred*

1920: Elected Governor of Illinois

1921-1929: Served as 26th Governor (2 terms)

Small Family and the Daily Journal

March 16, 1903: Len Small led group of 50 investors to found Kankakee Daily Journal

- Other principals: Senator Edward C. Curtis, Col. D.R. Miller, Edward Jeffers, Charles Robinson

1913: Son Leslie C. Small became manager/publisher

- Paper remained in Small family control for over 100 years

2024: Shaw Media acquired the Daily Journal

Small's $2 Million Theft

The Crime (1917-1919 as State Treasurer):

- Embezzled over $2 million from state funds
- Created money-laundering scheme using fake banks
- Deposited state money in non-existent "Grant Park Bank"
- Kept interest earned on state funds for himself
- Equivalent to $35M in today’s dollars

Indictment: December 1921, six months after becoming governor

Gov. Small Goes to Trial

Charges:

- Embezzlement
- Conspiracy to defraud the state
- Money laundering

Trial Location: Waukegan, Illinois (June 1922)

Defense Strategy: Claimed political persecution

Result: Acquitted by jury on all charges

Gov. Small Goes to Trial

Small Threatens the National Guard

•August 9, 1921 – after his embezzlement indictment
•Sangamon County sheriff came to Springfield with arrest warrant
•Small holed up in the State Capitol and refused to submit

•**Threatened to call out the Illinois National Guard** to keep the sheriff away “at the point of a bayonet”

•Day-long standoff ended with a deal to serve the warrant later at the Governor’s Mansion

How Small Bought His Freedom

Suspicious Facts:

- 8 of 12 jurors received state jobs after acquittal
- Evidence of bribery by Al Capone's gangsters
- Walter Stevens (Capone associate) involved

Grand Jury Investigation:

- Two gangsters refused to testify
- Both jailed for contempt of court
- **Governor Small immediately pardoned them**

Small Was Guilty – The Evidence

Despite criminal acquittal:

- State filed civil lawsuit to recover stolen funds
- **Illinois Supreme Court ruled against Small**
- Court found he **HAD** embezzled state money

- **Ordered to repay $650,000 to the state**

- Small had to pay – proving his guilt

- Kept approximately $1.35 million for himself

The Governor and the Gangster

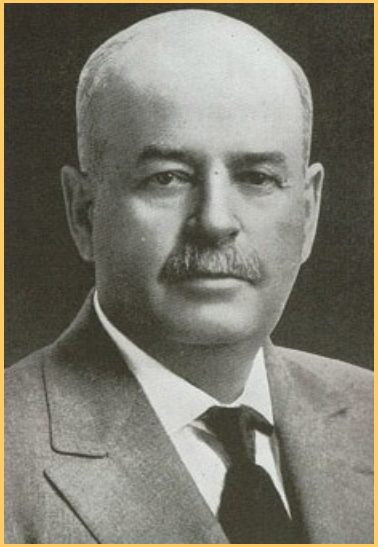
Timeline Overlap:

- Len Small: Governor 1921-1929
- Al Capone: Chicago crime boss 1920-1931

The Connection:

- Capone's men tampered with Small's jury
- Small pardoned Capone's associates
- Mutual benefit relationship
- Small provided political protection

Al Capone



Len Small

Small – "The Pardoning Governor"

The Scope:

- Sold thousands of pardons and paroles
- Prices varied by crime and prisoner's ability to pay
- Recipients included:
- Gangsters and organized crime figures
- Murderers
- Sex traffickers
- Cop killers

Most Notorious Pardon – The Guziks

The Crime (1922):

- Jake and Harry Guzik convicted of sex trafficking
- Ran prostitution operation for Johnny Torrio

The Pardon (1923):

- Small pardoned them while appeal pending
- Never served prison time
- Reform groups protested vigorously

Political Payback

The Deal:

- Walter Stevens (Torrio/Capone beer runner) helped at Small's trial
- Stevens was known as "the immune outlaw"
- Torrio contributed to Thompson-Lundin political machine
- Thompson-Lundin machine allied with Small machine
- Corruption at highest levels of state government

Result: Guziks opened new brothel within 3 months

Political Payback

Small's Political Alliance with Frank L. Smith of Dwight

Col. Frank L. Smith – Dwight Banker and Power Broker:

•Commissioned Frank Lloyd Wright to design his bank building (opened 1906)

•Rose to power in Republican Party with Len Small's backing

•Small helped Smith become Republican National Committeeman from Illinois

•**December 1926:** After U.S. Senator McKinley died, Governor Small appointed Smith to fill the vacant Senate seat

Political Payback

- **U.S. Senate refused to seat Smith** due to campaign finance corruption
    - Special election held and Smith did not become a Senator
- Connection shows Small's political machine extended into Livingston County

1920s – KKK Returns to the Midwest

National Context:

- 1915: D.W. Griffith film "Birth of a Nation" mythologized KKK
- Triggered nationwide KKK resurgence
- Second wave of Klan focused on Midwest and North
- Peak membership: 1923-1926
- 4-6 million members nationwide

Illinois: One of strongest KKK states in 1920s

Governor Small's KKK Alliance

The Political Partnership:

- KKK actively worked for Small's campaigns
- Distributed sample ballots marked for Small
- Held rallies to support his elections
- Small allowed Klan to use:
    - -State Capitol rooms as dressing rooms
    - -Illinois State Fairgrounds for rallies
    - -U.S. cavalry horses for parades

KKK at Illinois State Fairgrounds

September 1922:

- Massive KKK initiation at state fairgrounds
- Thousands of hooded Klansmen
- Burning cross inside coliseum
- Held with Governor Small's approval
- Legislature had forbidden Klan use of fairgrounds
- Small ignored legislative mandate

Investigation: Fairground custodian fired, but Klan continued

KKK at Illinois State Fairgrounds

How Ku Klux Klan Was Permitted by Gov. Small to Use Illinois State Fair Ground Buildings

WHEN KU KLUX KLAN USED ILLINOIS STATE FAIR BUILDINGS AT SPRINGFIELD FOR INITIATION SERVICES WHILE LEN SMALL WAS GOVERNOR OF STATE AND COULD HAVE PREVENTED MASKED GATHERING.

After years of denial by Gov. Small and his cabinet of Klan affiliations or sympathies this picture showing the initiation of Abraham Lincoln klan No. 3 in the main building at the state fair grounds was obtained by William Harrison of 4353 Vincennes avenue, colored lawyer, who is an assistant attorney general. The picture, captioned: "Len Small, the Klan's Friend," is being sent to voters who had previously received Gov. Small's denial of friendship for the klan. (Story on page 5.)

- Chicago Tribune Photo/Article
- Photo was mailed to black voters with caption “Len Small – the Klan’s Friend”
- For more information – see the Sangamon Valley Historical Society web site

KKK Marches from Statehouse

October 1924:

- Klansmen marched from Illinois State Capitol to fairgrounds
- Many were hooded
- Lighted crosses at fairgrounds
- Parades with floats
- Political speeches supporting Small
- Fireworks display
- Used state cavalry horses in parade

KKK Control of Springfield

Chicago Daily Tribune (Oct 28, 1924):

- Klan "working for Small"
- Members used Capitol rooms "with impunity"
- Hooded Klansmen rode U.S. cavalry horses
- Used fairgrounds "in defiance of legislature mandate"
- State government officials participated
- Investigation documented Klan infiltration

Proof of Small-Klan Connection

Chicago Daily Tribune Investigation:

- Published photo titled "Len Small, the Klan's friend"
- Showed 1922 state fairgrounds KKK initiation
- Thousands of hooded members with burning cross
- Photo discovered by Assistant AG William Harrison (African-American)
- Mailed to black voters before 1928 primary
- **Small lost that primary election**

Proof of Small-Klan Connection

- There are at least two known cases in Livingston County where people were cleaning out an attic and found a KKK uniform likely dating back to the 1920s.

- These were discovered in the 2016 to 2026 era, about 100 years after KKK was popular in Illinois.

Historian Documents Small-Klan Connection

Jim Ridings Book: "Len Small: Governors and Gangsters"

Key findings:

- Small's corruption worse than Rod Blagojevich
- Documented KKK support for Small's elections
- Exposed jury tampering by Capone's gang
- Revealed extent of pardon-selling scheme

Jim Ridings gave his Tent Colony book presentation to Livingston County Historical Society November 16, 2023.

African Americans in Fairbury Before 1920s

- Fairbury founded 1857
- Until early 1920s: ~100 African Americans lived peacefully
- African Methodist Episcopal church built before 1885
- Located at SW corner of Walnut and Second streets
- Children fully integrated in schools
- Buried in Fairbury's Graceland Cemetery
- Members of high school athletic teams
- Integrated community life

African Americans in Fairbury Before 1920s

- Unfortunately, no photographs are known to exist for the A.M.E. church in Fairbury torn down ~1968
- It is shown on the 1885 and 1911 Fairbury Sanborn Insurance Maps
- Image of old church generated by Perplexity AI (Artificial Intelligence) program
- Matches the aerial view and size from the old Sanborn Insurance maps

The Film That Changed Everything

1915:

- D.W. Griffith's "Birth of a Nation" produced
- Silent film mythologized founding of KKK
- Shown at Third Street Opera House in Fairbury
- Old Fairbury photograph shows advertisement
- Film helped launch KKK resurgence in Midwest
- Marked beginning of racial tensions

September 1923 – Bartle Steidinger Farm

The Rally:

- Held at farm north of Fairbury
- **5,000 to 8,000 people attended from across Illinois**
- Small fiery cross at gate
- Two larger crosses in center of field:
- One red cross
- One white cross (10-12 feet high, electrically lighted)
- **165 men initiated as KKK members that night**

    - One red cross
    - One white cross (10-12 feet high, electrically lighted)

September 1923 – Bartle Steidinger Farm

- No photographs are known to exist for the 5,000+ People KKK rally held just north of Fairbury

- Image generated by Perplexity AI (Artificial Intelligence) program.

October 1923 – Recruiting Speech

Reverend Patton of Assumption, Illinois:

- Gave KKK recruiting speech in Fairbury
- Part of coordinated recruitment campaign
- KKK held events in all small towns around Fairbury
- Targeted central Illinois communities
- Peak of Klan expansion in region

June 27, 1924 – W.D. Spence Farm

Second Major Rally:

- Held at Spence farm south of Fairbury
- Another large gathering
- Cross burning ceremony
- Recruitment and initiation event
- Part of 1924 election campaign supporting Small

October 1924 – County-Wide Livingston Event

Chautauqua Park, Pontiac:

- County-wide meeting of KKK
- Drew members from across Livingston County
- Fairbury, Pontiac, and surrounding towns represented
- Part of organized Klan activity in region
- Coordinated with Small's re-election campaign

Local Union Leaders Fight the Klan

May 1924 – Illinois Miners' State Convention:

- 800 coal mining union representatives attended
- Two from Fairbury:
  -**Edward Carlson** – President of Fairbury local
  -**R.A. McAllister** – Secretary of Fairbury local

Their Resolution: Made KKK membership impossible for any miner.

Convention adopted the Fairbury proposal!

The James Churchill Murder

1928 – Worst Racial Violence:

- James Churchill (29) driving horse-drawn wagon with rocks
- Leroy Harice Carter (30), African American, returning from fishing
- Argument over right-of-way on First Street
- Carter's passenger Livera Word urged him to take her gun
  and go back to site and shoot Churchill
- **Carter murdered Churchill**
- Sheriff's deputies prevented lynching attempt

Burning Cross at Grisson Farm

Two Nights After Churchill Murder (~10:30 PM):

- 6-7 cars of men drove to Will Grisson's house (south of Fairbury)
- Grisson was African American farmer
- **Men planted burning cross in yard**

Shot at the house – bullets rattled windows

- Grisson and wife fled across fields
- Cross burned until 2:00 AM

African Americans Leave Fairbury

Will Grisson's Response:

- Next morning walked to town to "telegraph for money to get out of Fairbury"
- He and wife fled the community
- Never returned

The Impact:

- 1920: 24 Black or African American residents
- 1930: 50
- 1940: 20
- 2000: 16
- KKK terror campaign succeeded in driving people out of Fairbury

Local Newspaper Documents KKK Era

Fairbury Blade newspaper:

- Many stories about KKK between 1923-1926 (Small was Governor 1921-1929)
- Documented rallies, speeches, violence
- Covered Churchill murder and aftermath
- Reported on burning cross incident
- After 1926: No more KKK stories
- National Klan movement lost steam late 1920s

KKK Activity Beyond Fairbury

Documented rallies and activity:

Pontiac: Chautauqua Park rally (October 1924)
Springfield area: Multiple state fairgrounds events
Bureau County nearby: Princeton, Ottawa, Sheffield, Tiskilwa, Walnut, Wyanet (1922-1925)

- Regular rallies throughout central Illinois
- Large crowds drawn to rallies

What Else Did Small Do as Governor?

Roads Program:

- Built over 400 miles paved roads in 1921
- Over 1,200 miles paved roads in 1924
- Earned nickname "Good Roads Governor"
- Used to distract from corruption
- Route 66 Created in 1926 when Small was Governor (2026 is 100th Anniversary of Route 66)

Other Initiatives:

- Created Illinois State Police Department
- Building construction programs

Final Act of Corruption

January 14, 1929 – Leaving Governor's Mansion:

- **Stole silverware from mansion**
- **Stole other valuables**
- Took state property as personal items

Later Political Career:

- Ran unsuccessfully for governor in 1932
- Ran unsuccessfully for governor in 1936
- Died May 17, 1936

Illinois' Most Corrupt Governors

How does Small compare to the four modern governors who went to prison?

Let's examine:

- Type of corruption
- Whether they went to prison
- Length of sentence if convicted
- Amount of money involved

Five Most Corrupt Illinois Governors Compared

Governor	Years	Crime	Convicted?	Prison Time
Len Small	1921-1929	Embezzlement, pardons, jury tampering	NO (was convicted in Civil Case)	0 years
Otto Kerner	1961-1968	Bribery, tax evasion	YES (1973)	3 years
Dan Walker	1973-1977	Bank fraud, perjury	YES (1987)	1.5 years
George Ryan	1999-2003	Racketeering, fraud	YES (2006)	5 years
Rod Blagojevich	2003-2009	Selling Senate seat	YES (2011)	8 years

Small's Unique Level of Corruption

What Made Gov. Small Different:

Never went to prison despite proven crimes
Allied with organized crime (Al Capone)
Allied with terrorist organization (KKK)

- **Sold pardons to murderers and cop killers**

Embezzled more money ($2M = ~$35M today)
Allowed KKK terror campaign in Illinois including Fairbury

Jim Ridings' Assessment: Small worse than Blagojevich

The Newspaper Dynasty Continues

Kankakee Daily Journal:

- Founded by Small in 1903 with 50 investors
- Son Leslie Small: publisher 1913-1953 (40 years)
- Grandson Len H. Small: publisher until 1980
- Great-granddaughter Jean Alice Small: Editor & Publisher 1980+
- Family owned for 121 years (1903-2024)

<u>October 2024: Shaw Media acquired Daily Journal</u>

Controversial Commemoration

Governor Small Memorial & Park:

- Located in Kankakee County
- Commemorates his "Good Roads" program
- No mention of corruption, KKK ties, or pardons scandal

Historical Assessment:

- Most corrupt Illinois governor
- Connection to organized crime unprecedented
- Alliance with KKK caused lasting damage

What Can We Learn from Small's Era?

Important Lessons:

- Corruption has real human costs
- Alliance between politics and hate groups endangers communities
- Jury tampering undermines justice system
- "Good works" don't excuse criminal behavior
- Historical documentation is crucial
- Local resistance matters

Research Sources

Books:

- Jim Ridings, "Len Small: Governors and Gangsters" (2010)
- "Corrupt Illinois" – Thomas J. Gradel & Dick Simpson

Newspapers:

- Fairbury Blade (1923-1928)
- Chicago Daily Tribune (1920s)

Archives:

- Livingston County Historical Society
- Illinois State Historical Society

Thank You

Livingston County Historical Society

Special thanks to:

- Ron Baker for the Idea of doing this Presentation
- Jim Ridings for his groundbreaking research
- Fairbury Blade for documenting this era
- Edward Carlson and R.A. McAllister of Fairbury for standing against the Klan
- Local historians preserving these stories

Questions?